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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 MANILA 000703

SIPDIS

STATE FOR EAP/MTS

E.O. 12958: DECL: 03/31/2019  
TAGS: [PGOV](#) [MOPS](#) [PTER](#) [PINR](#) [KISL](#) [RP](#)  
SUBJECT: PHILIPPINE GOVERNMENT REJECTS TERRORISTS' DEMANDS

REF: A. MANILA 686-RED CROSS KIDNAPPERS INCREASE DEMANDS  
[1](#)B. MANILA 630-RED CROSS HEAD VOICES CONCERN

Classified By: Ambassador Kristie A. Kenney, reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

[1](#)1. (C) SUMMARY: Philippine Secretary of National Defense Gilberto Teodoro called the Ambassador in the early morning hours of March 31 to update her on the situation involving the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) hostages being held by the Abu Sayyaf Group (ASG) on Jolo Island. Teodoro told the Ambassador that President Arroyo had instructed him to contact the Ambassador, citing the close U.S.-Philippine partnership on counterterrorism. Teodoro informed the Ambassador that the Philippine government decided it could not accede to the ASG's demand that all security forces throughout the island of Jolo must be withdrawn to a single garrison in Jolo City by 2:00 p.m. March 31, or a hostage would be beheaded. Teodoro said this was a difficult decision but the Government could not turn Jolo island over to terrorists. He said that if harm were to come to the hostages as a result of that decision, the Philippine government would launch a rescue operation. At close of business in the Philippines, the ASG's 2:00 p.m. deadline had passed with no new information regarding the hostages' fate. The Ambassador urged that Teodoro think carefully through the risks of any rescue effort, noting the importance of hostage safety, but agreed that abandoning Jolo to terrorists would be a major setback to our mutual counterterrorism efforts. Teodoro said that Philippine authorities recognized that the rescue effort may result in hostage casualties, but that the government had worked "too long and too hard" to improve security on Jolo Island to hand over the gains to the ASG terrorists. END SUMMARY.

[1](#)2. (C) At approximately 4:30 a.m. Manila time March 31, Philippine Secretary of National Defense Gilberto Teodoro telephoned the Ambassador to inform her that the Philippine government had just concluded an emergency meeting on the status of the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) hostages being held by Abu Sayyaf Group (ASG) terrorists on Jolo Island (ref A). Teodoro said he was calling on behalf of President Arroyo, who had instructed him to keep the Ambassador apprised of developments, "since we are partners in the counterterrorism effort."

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DEADLINE PASSES WITH NO NEWS  
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[1](#)3. (C) The government, Teodoro said, had "bent over backwards to accommodate the kidnappers," but determined that it could not agree to the ASG's demand to withdraw all security personnel on Jolo -- an island with a population of over

300,000 -- to Jolo City. Teodoro acknowledged the government understood the decision might result in the kidnappers harming the hostages, at which point the government would be compelled to launch a rescue attempt that might result in loss of life to military personnel and possibly the ICRC workers. Although the ASG had given the government a deadline of 2:00 p.m. on March 31 to accept their demands, Teodoro said the military was already making preparations for a rescue operation if needed. As of close of business, the deadline had passed with no new information regarding the hostages' fate.

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HARD-WON GAINS  
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¶4. (C) In her conversation with Secretary Teodoro, the Ambassador reiterated the United States and the Philippines remain strong partners, and the USG is committed to a robust counterterrorism posture. She underscored that every effort should be made to protect the safety of the hostages. Despite the tense circumstances, Teodoro was calm and determined, saying he understood the gravity of the situation and was ready to take the criticism if things did not go well, but that the Philippine government had worked "too long and too hard" to reduce the capabilities of the ASG terrorists on Jolo Island and could not give up those hard-won gains. He said that the terrorist kidnappers had not released a hostage when the Armed Forces complied with the previous demand (ref A) and feared this demand would produce similar results.

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¶5. (C) The Ambassador later spoke with the Philippine Red Cross chairman, Senator Richard Gordon, to discuss the situation. She assured him that the USG was very concerned about the hostages' safety and had a great deal of sympathy for their families and the ICRC as an organization. Ambassador noted the difficult situation the Philippine Government currently faced as they could not jeopardize the safety of Jolo Island's entire population by giving in to terrorist demands, but were aware of the risks to the hostages' lives. Clearly exhausted by the situation, Gordon said he was obligated to represent the ICRC in his role as the Chairman of Philippine Red Cross, and that he continued to hope the kidnappers would release one hostage if the Philippine Government removed their security forces (armed forces and police) from around Jolo. Senator Gordon thanked the Ambassador for the support the Embassy had given the ICRC and said he hoped he could count on our help if any hostages were released. The Ambassador responded that the USG stood ready to provide humanitarian assistance as needed.

¶6. (C) A/DCM also spoke with the ICRC representative, Jean-Daniel Tauxe, who acknowledged the peril in giving in to demands to withdraw security forces from Jolo, but stressed the overriding concern for the safety of the three hostages.

KENNEY